Ethics For Modern Christians, Part IV
Freedom
Galatians 2:15-17, 5:1, 13-15
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Sooner or later you have to deal with Freedom. In this series of sermons on Ethics for Modern Christians we have thought about the fact that we are in a new situation and that more is demanded of us ethically than of any other generation of Christian people before us. We have looked at the New Morality and discovered that it isn't really very new; that the fact of the matter is that our Lord Himself was criticized for operating outside the boundaries of law and tradition. Last Sunday we thought about a story He told; a story of two traditional religious types who walked by a man in critical need, and the Samaritan, the one operating outside the framework of religious rules, who was a neighbor to the man in need.

Today - Freedom. What a troublesome word it is! Men have died to win it, and their children and grandchildren have found it so difficult, so unattractive, so demanding, that they have given it away. No topic has inspired humanity to more eloquent rhetoric. In 1941 Franklin D. Roosevelt said: "We, and all others who believe as we do, would rather die on our feet than live on our knees." But today political scientists observe that freedom is in trouble throughout the world; that the momentum belongs to oppression and tyranny. Social scientists debate whether it exists at all. Some suggest that freedom of will is an illusion; that we are programmed biologically and act, essentially, on the basis of instinct and need. Others suggest that we behave on the basis of the expectations of our parents, peers and culture. In the civil arena freedom is very tenuous. It does not include, every school child knows, the right to "shout fire in a crowded theatre". Whether it includes the right to shout obscenities at the corner of Broad and High is another matter which gives us periodic pause. Freedom does not include the right to drive at 60 miles per hour on a city street. It does not include, I keep discovering in a painfully tangible way, the right to park for more than an hour, in downtown Columbus, free of charge.

In terms of ethics, freedom is very much an enigma. It is mentioned prominently in both Bible and Christian Theology. Sometimes Christian Freedom is used in defense of the Mid-twentieth Century's great ethical dictum - "Do your own thing". Our friend, Elton Trueblood, thinks that is the sickest sentiment in history. It is simply an upbeat version of the old hedonist credo - "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die", the bankruptcy of which is demonstrated the next morning when we don't die. The fact is that we must continue to live, ordinarily, with the results of our behavior: so must others. And so without some sense of responsibility, some high commitment, freedom comes dangerously close to simple selfish indulgence, or what Christians used to recognize as sin.

Given all the ambiguity and perplexity surrounding the word, freedom remains very much at the heart of the Gospel. The early Christian Church in Galatia encountered it squarely. In its infancy the Church was the child of Judaism. Jesus was a Jew: His disciples were Jews. He said, rather clearly, that His purpose was not to destroy the law of Judaism. That law, based on the Ten Commandments, expanded to include 613 separate rules, governed all of life. It was the ehtical code. It described how God wanted human life to be lived. It became the vehicle by which a person lived the good and righteous life. It was not there initially, but over the centuries, the law came to be regarded as the way a person earned salvation. That really wasn't much of an issue so long as Christianity was confined to Judaic culture. But a man by the name of Paul felt called to take the Good News of Jesus Christ into the cities of

Asia Minor: Gentile cities. The record of that project is found in the fifth book of the New Testament, The Acts of the Apostles - exciting reading. The people Paul encountered in those cities were not particularly interested in Jewish law: the dietary restrictions, the Sabbath rules were totally strange to them. And so Paul started his venture where they were. He told them about God's love in Jesus of Nazareth, and the new life in God's spirit which was available to them. Some of them believed: Paul baptized them and brought them together in tiny communities called churches: men, women, Jews, Greeks, slaves, freemen.

Two things happened almost immediately. The Christians back in Jerusalem heard about what Paul was doing and were aghast. Paul, they thought, was far too liberal, too easy. Some of the more zealous among them traveled to the cities where Paul had been,met with the newly converted Christians and delivered some disconcerting news. "Friends," they said, "you really have to be a Jew before you can be a Christian. You have to obey this law - all of it. If you are a man, you have to undergo the rite of circumcision." They were called Judaizers: apparently they precipitated quite a crisis. Some Gentile Christians quit. After all, they hadn't bargained for this: Paul hadn't told them about this part. Others were convinced and began furiously to abide by the Mosaic law, all the while looking askance at their less zealous brothers and sisters. The situation was confusing and destructive, particularly in Galatia. And so Paul wrote a little letter: a remarkable document which has been described as the Magna Charta of Christian Freedom. "No man is ever justified by doing what the law demands," he wrote, "you, my friends, were called to be free men...for the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment; 'Love your neighbor as yourself'."

"You are free," Paul told them. "In Jesus Christ you are free from trying to earn your salvation by obeying the rules of religion. God won't love you any more if you fast, pray twenty times a day, and submit to circumcision. He already loves you totally. If you elect to do these things, do them out of gratitude for God's love."

Thus he thwarted the efforts of the Judaizers to impose legalism on the Christian community. And then the second thing happened: freedom became anarchy. "Hurrah," said the Galatian Christians, "we are free. If God doesn't love us anymore for obeying the rules, why bother?" Who hasn't asked that on occasion? "Let's do what we want to do!" And they did. In the name of Christian freedom they lived it up. In a sister church in Corinth they got drunk on the wine of the Lord's Supper. They fought with each other, and argued, and practiced a wide-open sexual standard under the guise of freedom. And so Paul wrote again, "You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh." What kind of freedom is that? We are called to it, but advised not to use it. Paul wrote: "through love be servants of one another." The way really to be free, that is to say, is by giving it away - in love and service.

If we Christians have any ethical wisdom at all, it is in that brief statement. Freedom is what we are given by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But to realize it and use it we must freely accept the standard of service to others - love for others - as our ethical benchmark. Joseph Fletcher writes: "Christian Situation Ethics is not a system or program of living according to a code, but an effort to relate love to a world of relativities...It is a strategy of love." (Situation Ethics, p.30).

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo near the end of the Fourth Century, wrote his spiritual autobiography under the title Confessions. He described his struggle with the Gospel as a young man; how he tried the life of a scholar, then the life of

a lusty libertine, and how he returned to the church to become one of its leading apologists. One of the most significant things he ever said, nearly 1,600 years ago, is this deceptively simple little sentence: "Love, and then do what you please."

Helmut Thielicke, our contemporary in Germany, observes: "At crucial points in the Bible Jesus refuses to give us very definite and detailed rules of behavior. It would be far too simple to follow them; all you would have to do would be to pull your belt tighter; otherwise, though, you could be miles away inwardly. Instead of these rules, Jesus unlocks the much more strenuous world of freedom to us and lets us decide for ourselves which way of obedience we think is demanded of us." (How to Believe Again, p.146).

Does it sound difficult? Demanding? Vague? Risky? It is; those and more. Freedom is troublesome. Jean Paul Sartre, French existentialist, saw freedom as a kind of curse: "we are condemned to freedom," he wrote and realized that without it we are less than human but with it we are seldom very happy. People who live in rigid, structured cultures sometimes have a great deal of trouble existing in the Western World. I'm interested in the fact that of the number of persons who risk life and limb escaping from East to West Germany, a portion choose, voluntarily, to return. They find freedom too unsettling, too anxiety-producing. On the very day, two summers ago, that Indira Ghandi clamped down on the press, declared a state of emergency and put Indian democracy on the shelf I found myself in a conversation at Princeton with an Indian Christian, a staunch supporter of Mrs. Ghandi. I tried to explain that the freedoms so easily and simply suspended in India were at the heart of democracy. He couldn't understand. "Without those freedoms", he said, "India could get on with the business of providing food and economic stability for her people." When I suggested that Lenin, Mao Tse Tung and Adolf Hitler shared the same sentiment he became angry. It was unkind of me. But freedom is troublesome.

The church, for instance, has always flirted with legalism as the simplest way to foster right behavior. The Christian Ethic has often been expressed in simplistic terms of "don't do this - don't do that". And to many well-meaning Christians the suggestion that the strategy of love is the important point, not the rule book, has sounded like soft-headed liberalism.

In the arena of our common life the issues become even more difficult. I think that any comparison between Thomas Jefferson's commitment to a free press and the publication of a pornographic magazine is outlandish and dishonest and vulgar. Jefferson didn't mean Hustler Magazine. But the issue will not submit to simple resolution. No Christian with any sensitivity at all to the sanctity of sexuality, the dignity of persons and the beauty of honest love can be anything but appalled at pornography as it is now commonly available. But Christians, among all people, ought to be very careful about giving away the freedom to choose what one prefers to read. That, I understand, is not a very popular position. There should be other options available to us. I look to the courts to discover and devise them. I value my freedom not to have to confront, nor to have my children confront, pornography on every corner. But I remain unconvinced that censorship is the way best to serve my freedom. I've agonized over this and my own position became solid when, reading for this sermon I discovered the following statement by Andrei Vishinsky, a spokesman for the USSR. He said, "...freedom of speech, of the press is the property of all the citizens of the USSR, fully guaranteed by the State upon the sole condition that they be utilized in accord with the interests of the toilers, and to the end of strengthening the socialist social order." (Declaration of Freedom, p.59). The trouble with that is that someone has to decide what is in the common interest. In a free society that someone must be the individual.

Freedom is troublesome. Apart from the political arena the area of ethics which seems to concern us most deeply is sexual conduct. Until fairly recently the church's answer to the question of pre and extra marital sex was one word: Don't. And then Kinsey and others informed us that a lot of people weren't paying much attention and that those who were interested in chastity and fidelity weren't receiving much real help from religion. The simple solutions of legalism fell apart in the Mid-twentieth Century. Freedom, once again, looked suspiciously like license to do whatever one wanted to do. "Do your own thing", a generation of young people told us. And weekly, a television show advised that "if it feels good do it!" I continue to believe, however, that the best approach to sexual morality is based on love - love of self, love for the other, and love for all the others who inevitably are involved. I continue to believe that building an ethic on the contraction "don't" is a waste of time; but that young people know what you're talking about when you begin with love and trust and self-esteem, seasoned with the grace of forgiveness and understanding. We have given up too easily. I think we can and should say that the highest exercise of freedom sometimes is in self-restraint out of real love for the other.

Twenty centuries ago St. Paul observed that freedom is not really freedom when it is used as the rationale for doing whatever one wants to do. Trueblood writes that empty freedom turns into a new kind of bondage - bondage to self. St. Paul called it "slavery to the flesh". We know, I think, what that means. I've been reading Thomas Merton this Lenten Season. He wrote - on Freedom, "I do not find in myself the power to be happy by doing what I like." How ironic, that the goal for which we strive - doing whatever we want to do - turns out to be rather unhappy. "On the contrary if I do nothing except what pleases my own fancy I will be miserable most of the time. This would not be so if my will had not been created to use its own freedom in the love of others." (No Man Is An Island, p.35).

Christian freedom is the freedom from restrictive religious rules: freedom for serving and loving others. The second statement is more important than the first. It is not an answer for every question but a "strategy of love". It is the demanding call of God to obey Him by living an ethic of love in every situation. Sometimes it will be very difficult: the way will not always be clear: the going may be risky. But God wants us to work our way through it. Thielicke writes: "God wants us totally. He wants our understanding: He wants the exertion of our thought processes; He wants our struggle for the right path; He wants - to use the words of the Bible itself - all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, even our mental strength." (op cit p.147).

Ethics for Christians begin not with rules and regulations, but with Gospel: the Gospel that sounds like this: "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." Before any demands are made of us we are given something - God's love. In Jesus Christ, we believe that God cares about us personally: He accepts us as we are: He doesn't ask us to become loveable before He extends His love. Love is not the reward for goodness; it is how God hopes to inspire us to be good. He loves us as only a father can love his children. But it seems that we are always trying to turn that around: to put our goodness before His love: to devise ways to render ourselves deserving of His love. We have, that is to say, turned the Gospel into bad news: the bad news that we've got a long way to go before God can bring Himself to care about us.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News. Very good news - God loves us in spite of what we are. To know that: to know that I am loved by my Creator is to be devastated: it is to be made humble at the incredible nature of things. It is to be grateful beyond the words with which to describe it. It is to be free - in the sense that I know now that I don't have to earn God's love: integrity has always

told me that I couldn't do it anyway. Now I know that I don't have to spend the rest of my life worrying about it - I already have it. And it is suddenly, out of the deepest gratitude, to want somehow to love in answer.

It is to sense, perhaps for the first time, that the only way I have of answering God's love for me - is to act lovingly in every situation. That is the beginning of Christian Ethics.

Helmut Thielicke is very helpful when he suggests that the Christian Ethic is not a road map but a compass. The compass points to the one ethical imperative that is always valid: love God and your neighbor. But we must find our own way. That is our freedom. The ethical landscape includes mountains and swamps and very rough terrain. At every corssroads we have to decide what to do. Following the compass, we are free to pause, free to be creative as we devise ways of conquering the rough terrain..."The whole countryside is mine: that is my freedom. But I am Christ's and His love controls and leads me." (Ibid p.150-151).

We cannot go it alone. Given their freedom by God, people in the past have been inclined either to abuse it, or to turn it in for a form of safe legalism. We need help. We need the support and stimulation and leading of the God who has set us free.

The times in which we are living, and the era into which we are moving will be demanding. Things may never be as simple ethically as they once were. Technology, mobility, urbanization will continue to challenge Christian people to find new and relevant solutions to hard moral questions.

My deepest conviction is that the God who gives us freedom will walk with us and guide us and be with us through the moral complexities of our time: that He calls us to the exciting venture of life lived as free people, and that He will not abandon us when we stumble and fall.

That was said very well in a great old hymn written in 1745:

> Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah
> Pilgrim through this barren land.
> I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
> Hold me with thy powerful hand.

You and I are free. We have been given the burden - and gift - of personal responsibility. It demands our heart - our soul - our mind.

Amen.

Guide us, Father, as we make our way. Give us courage to embrace and live our freedom. Give us love big enough to answer Yours; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.